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ABSTRACT

A research effort was undertaken seeking to (1) describe and compare planning activities and concerns of state divisions of vocational education and local education agencies; (2) assess the degree to which each agency perceives articulation as necessary; (3) identify barriers and facilitators; (4) describe the nature of state-local coordination; and (5) develop a self-assessment procedure to evaluate planning and coordination efforts. Factors affecting the opportunity and the incentive to establish cooperative ties include effects of overly centralized authority and decision making, awareness of other organizations and their domains of influence, asymetrical relationships between organizations (where unequal benefit derives from cooperation), and "protecting one's turf." Methodological considerations dictated that activities contributing to effective decisions in six functional areas (resource allocation and acquisition, program mix, improvement, and maintenance, supportive services, and system maintenance and support) be considered vocational education planning activities, even though great state-to-state variation exists. Eight states and project directors were chosen; about 400 persons were interviewed; preliminary assessments were made prior to beginning data collection; and appropriate document sources were identified. Tentative results (to be detailed in the final report) indicate barriers and facilitators were identified and a compendium of planning activities and concerns was developed. (CP)

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COORDINATION BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES IN PLANNING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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Problem Under Study

Title II of the Education Amendments of 1976 promotes the improvement of vocational planning as its central purpose. The thrust of this purpose is to maintain (or promote) the responsiveness of vocational education service delivery through rational comprehensive planning. If intended purposes are to be achieved, there is one significant aspect of comprehensive planning which should not be overlooked; this is the coordination and articulation between pertinent groups, agencies, and institutions. The strength of articulated planning efforts lies in its ability to widen the scope of concern for service delivery, as well as in its potential for promoting the accommodation and integration of multiple needs and interests.

In any comprehensive planning strategy for vocational education, there are two primary targets for articulation or coordination: the state division of vocational education (SDVE), and the multiplicity of local agencies and institutions responsible for providing vocational education service. The problem under study, is the status of articulated planning between SDVE and LEA. More specifically, the research effort is seeking to identify and describe the barriers and facilitators to articulated vocational education planning between state and local vocational education agencies.

Specific Objectives

The major objectives are enumerated below.

(1) To document a description of vocational education planning activities and concerns at the state and local levels, and to document the results of comparing activities and concerns between these levels.

(2) To assess the degree to which each agency perceives articulation in planning as a necessary endeavor.

(3) To identify barriers and facilitators to articulated planning in vocational education.

(4) To provide a description of the nature of coordination between state and local agencies, and the organizational or environmental conditions which promote or impede coordination between these agencies.

(5) To abstract information about vocational education planning as it is practiced at both state and local levels for the development of a self-assessment procedure which will enable states to evaluate their planning and coordination efforts in vocational education.

Although the identification and description of barriers and facilitators to articulated planning are of central concern, many supplemental objectives are being addressed.

Related Literature

Coordination between agencies is presently receiving much attention from vocational education administrators, researchers, and policy-makers. This presumably results partly because of the emphasis of recent legislation, and partly because administrators of vocational education are becoming increasingly concerned about: (a) the effective utilization of resources; and, (b) the responsiveness of the vocational education system to the dynamic needs of society (Lamar et al, 1978). The benefits of coordination, however, will not be fully realized until agencies can: 1) evaluate their capacity for entering coordinated relationships; 2) recognize some of the barriers which impede coordination; and, 3) define some of the facilitative factors which can promote coordinated efforts.

Stevens (1979) stated that there are two aspects of cooperative ties, "the opportunity to cooperate, and the incentive to do so." Although the statement was made with reference to the cooperation between vocational education and CETA, it is equally applicable to cooperation between State Divisions of Vocational Education and Local Education Agencies. "Opportunity" and "incentive" as prerequisites to interagency coordination are only efficient summaries of the multitude of factors which impinge on cooperation between

agencies. The absence of "opportunity" and "incentive" pose great barriers to coordination; their presence provides the necessary foundation for the implementation of facilitative mechanisms.

But what can one consider ideal opportunities and incentives for coordination? Opportunities to coordinate infer that the atmosphere is conducive for organizations to enter a coordinated relationship; incentives on the other hand, comments on the impetus that one or both organizations may have for establishing such a relationship. The compatibility of goals and functions between two agencies is one of several critical factors in determining whether the atmosphere is conducive to coordination (Evan 1966). The activities of every organization can be similar, conflicting, or complementary. Conflicting goals are not conducive to a cooperative environment, while complementary (or similar) goals maximize the chances at cooperation (Jacobs, 1974; Aiken and Hage, 1968).

Evan (1966) noted that the number of organizations with which an agency interacts has significant consequences on its internal structure. A significant point to be noted is the relationship between the extent of interorganizational coordination and the number of active internal communication channels (Aiken and Hage, 1968). In order for an organization to maintain external relationships, internal communication must be increased to accommodate the internal flow of information necessary to maintain an adequate linkage. Since communication is increased with the intensity and number of cooperative ties, the need for internal adjustment in communication channels will be greatest when there are strong, cooperative efforts, or when a large number of organizations is party to some cooperative relationship.

Adjustment must also be made to the decision-making structure to provide an atmosphere conducive to cooperative ties. Aiken and Hage (1968) noted that rigidly centralized decision-making structures may have negative effects on

the ease of coordination. As coordinated efforts are expanded, the information necessary to make some decisions may not be timely in reaching a central decision-making authority. Information may even be lost within the organization. Hence, decision-making and authority must be decentralized to adapt to the intensity of interagency coordination. When administrators are not willing to share decision-making authority, cooperative ties become less productive and eventually die.

An even more serious twist, is the tendency for administrators to centralize authority when there are many cooperative ties in order to prevent the displacement of the organization's primary goals (Evan 1966). This tendency is counterproductive, and extremely detrimental to interagency coordination. Unless there is some degree of intraorganizational flexibility, inherent barriers to coordination are created.

There are other factors of similar importance which impinge on the extent to which a situation is conducive to the establishment and maintenance of cooperative ties. One such factor is awareness--the extent to which each organization is aware of the potential of other organizations to support its activities (Litwak and Hylton, 1962). Organizations are reluctant to establish coordinated relationships unless the activities of other organizations are completely understood, especially those activities which bear some relationship to the goals of the focal organization. Each organization must be aware that a state of interdependency exists. Unless there is such an awareness, the benefits of an intended relationship cannot be clear; awareness must precede the initiation of any relationship.

This awareness is not limited to knowledge of the other organization's activities; it can be extended to mean awareness of the other organization's domain of influence. Even more important than mere awareness, is that consensus regarding each organization's domain must exist (Levine and White, 1960).

Such consensus is a prerequisite for the exchange which results from any relationship. The absence of consensus as to each organization's domain of influence has the potential for creating tension and suspicion between organizations. The creation of such an environment is also detrimental to effective coordination.

Other factors such as "turf protection" (Denton 1975) and differential power between and within agencies can also affect coordination (Emerson 1962). Notwithstanding, if we can assume that the environment is conducive to coordination, we can assume further that the "opportunity" exists. But the existence of "opportunity" does not necessarily result in coordination between agencies. The incentive to establish a relationship must also exist.

Incentives must be sufficiently strong to overcome the need all organizations have to be autonomous. Organizations value their autonomy, and since coordination reduces this autonomy, organizations view the establishment of ties as a sacrifice (Evan 1966). As organizational need intensifies, however, organizations are willing to sacrifice greater amounts of their autonomy, and coordination as an avenue for need fulfillment becomes increasingly more attractive. Incentives then, stem from an organization's need, and the anticipated benefits which could be derived from the establishment of cooperative ties. As Stymne (1968) suggests "an organization will only maintain contacts which helps it to fulfill its subgoals."

Perceived benefits are the key to understanding the incentive to coordinate. But, benefits can vary substantially according to the nature of an organization, and the type of activities it performs. Such benefits can include financial, human, and physical resources; clients; power and control; political, organizational, and personal influence; and many other items of potential gain.

Many researchers have identified a relationship between perceived benefits and interagency coordination. Schmidt and Kochan (1977) noted that the perception

of benefits resulting from a relationship is a good predictor of the frequency of interaction between two organizations. The lowest frequency of interaction occurs when neither organization perceives benefits from interacting, and the greatest frequency occurs when both organizations perceive some benefits. The barriers often arise when one organization stands to benefit more than the other, or when the relationship is assymetrical (Jacobs 1974). These barriers result since such situations foster the adoption of coercive or defensive tactics by organizations seeking to expand or protect their own interest (Schmidt and Kochan, 1977).

Cohen (1977) has made forceful comments about the lack of adequate incentives in public agencies which results in the appearance of coordination, and have effects opposite to those intended.

Specific barriers and facilitative mechanisms affecting interagency coordination have been identified in a variety of literature (Minnesota State Planning Office, 1975; Denton, 1975). Although very different organizations were used as sources for their identification, "opportunity" and "incentive" seem to be the basic conditions of interest. The compatibility of goals and values; the internal structure and organizational flexibility of agencies; awareness of others; domain consensus; and perceived benefits, all seem to be critical factors to be addressed in assessing barriers and facilitators of coordination between any agency or organization.

Procedural Considerations

An appropriate method for the assessment of the coordination efforts necessary to conduct vocational education planning activities was determined in the light of two moderating circumstances. In most states, the planning function at the state and local levels is dispersed across administrative units. In addition, specific procedures for the conduct of planning activities were

expected to vary considerably between states, and between LEA's within each state. The method had to be sufficiently flexible for use in varying circumstances.

The first task, however, was operationally defining vocational education planning in the States. To operationally define planning, a basic tenet was used: the outcome of planning activities contributes to more effective decision-making. Since all states make decisions related to aspects of vocational education delivery, it was decided that activities contributing to effective decisions in six vocational education functional areas will be considered vocational education planning activities. The six functional areas are: resource allocation; resource acquisition; determining instructional program mix; program improvement and maintenance; instructional supportive services; and system maintenance and support. Any or all activities enabling effective decisions to be made with respect to any of these six functions can be justifiably considered planning activities. Although states will differ substantially on the variety and scope of their planning activities, they will all be engaged in some form of planning according to this perspective.

Research Method

The method used, attempted to parallel the paradigms of case studies and naturalistic inquiry by conducting an in-depth investigation at few locations, and by using multiple data acquisition procedures to collect a variety of information for later synthesis.

A sample of eight states was chosen using specific criteria, and a Project Coordinator was selected from each state. At an initial briefing session with project coordinators, their responsibilities were detailed, and the background and conceptual framework for the project, along with the procedures for data collection and synthesis were explained.

The data collection procedure required two critical phases: a preliminary assessment to sketch the condition of planning and coordination in each state; and the actual data collection from selected respondents.

The preliminary assessment was initiated by reviewing a brief description of the vocational education system and facilities in each state (WESTAT Inc, 1978). Subsequent to this review, each state was visited for one day. During the visit, documents containing information relating to barriers and facilitators to adequate planning and coordination were collected. These documents included state plans, accountability reports, local plans, minutes from meetings of state and local advisory councils, special reports relating to the status of vocational education in the state, and a variety of other sources which were considered to be pertinent. The Project Coordinator in each state was informally interviewed to obtain information about funding procedures and application processes.

A procedure was set up to abstract pertinent information about planning and coordination from these documents. This procedure produced information in six categories: coordination barriers; facilitators and concerns, and planning activities, problems and concerns. The recording forms developed for the purpose, enabled additional information to be recorded for each category when such information complemented the value of abstracted items.

The result of this information abstraction provided guidance in selecting interviewees, and determining the content of interviews. About 400 persons were interviewed across 8 states. In each state, respondents were selected at the state and local levels to provide a complement of persons involved in vocational education delivery. The sample included vocational education administrators, program supervisors and consultants at the state level; and local directors, community college deans, AVTS principals, and CETA prime sponsors at the local levels. Also included in the sample were school board members,

state and local advisory council members, and representatives from the state budget office, to mention a few.

The interview team was comprised of three to five members. Always represented were: someone involved with the project at the National Center; a field site coordinator from another state; and a consultant from within the state who is familiar with, but no longer a part of, the vocational education delivery system. Each served a very specific and essential role in the interviews.

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for later synthesis. With the objectives of the project as a focus, a detailed content analysis was performed. The content from a literature review was used along with information from the documents and interviews to produce a report addressing the barriers and facilitators to planning and coordination.

Tentative Results

Since the final report has not been submitted to the sponsors of the study, the results cannot be released. However, a variety of barriers and facilitators to coordination were identified, and, a compendium of planning activities, problems and concerns was developed.

Barriers to coordination and problems with planning were very much consistent with expectations from the literature review. And, in a general sense, the same can be said of facilitators. Nevertheless, unique and innovative structures and procedures have been implemented in most states to address planning and coordination problems.

The final report will be available in February 1980.

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